

The St. Gabriel's book club has been reading "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society." Guernsey is a small island located in the English Channel between England and France. Their economy is based on farming and fishing. I'm afraid I wouldn't do well there. I am neither farmer nor fisherman. But I do like to imagine what those lives are like. Especially fishing for your livelihood on the open sea. Not the fishing of our highly technological age, but the fishing of an earlier time, when the tools of your trade were just a boat, oars (or a sail if you're lucky), and a net. Imagine: day after day you get up early, hours before dawn. You join others by the sea who likewise are preparing for another day. Maybe you chat, or you work in silence. You inspect the boat, the oars, the nets. You linger a few minutes, knowing that once again you must put off from solid ground and relinquish yourself to the sea. And so you do, you and a companion, leaning into the oars that propel you toward success or failure. You steer by instinct; who knows where the fish will be? Eventually you stop rowing. You and your companion pick up the casting nets. You finger the weights on the net's periphery; you check that the lines are intact. Together you cast the net wide. You watch as the net sinks, the weighted edges faster than the center. Just as the net seems to disappear from view you both pull on the land line attached to the net's edges. And the net comes to you – if it is a good day it comes slow and heavy, teeming with fish. Most times it comes back light and empty. And so you lean into the oars and go further and do it all again. Some mornings begin warm and fine; other days are marked by storms that can threaten it all. There are days when the fish are always just beneath your nets, and days when they are nowhere to be found. A life defined by fish; many lives depending on fish.

I imagine that when Jesus comes upon Simon Peter and Andrew, John and James, it has been one of those days. Or I should say nights, as Simon Peter reminds us in the story. Jesus arrives at the lake of Genneseret (aka the Sea of Galilee) and begins teaching. The crowd around Jesus grows so large, and presses upon him so powerfully that he asks Simon Peter to row him out into the water away from the shore where he can teach a little more effectively. We get a sense here of the great hunger of the people for Jesus and his words. When Jesus finishes his teaching he turns to Simon Peter and suggests that they do a little fishing. Jesus, who knows nothing about fishing, thinks it's a good time and a good idea to try his hand at it. Simon Peter politely resists. He must have been thinking, what should I do? He doesn't know; he doesn't get it. Doesn't he know how weary my hands are? Can't he see the bleeding calluses from the days and nights of empty nets? Can't he see that I am as empty as that net, weary and worn as the boat we sit in?

But Simon Peter acquiesces, and casts his nets. And he experiences a catch the likes of which he has never known in his life: fish enough to fill two boats so that they nearly sink. And then what comes next is for me one of the most surprising statements that we find in scripture. When confronted with a catch such as this how many of us would not think, "Wow! This is great! This Jesus guy is the goose that lays the golden egg. With him I will never want or need again. No more long weary days or nights. If I stick with him I will never hunger again." Wouldn't you think those thoughts? I know I would. And we can hear televangelists and other proponents of the prosperity gospel proclaim the same: indeed Jesus is all about making you rich. And here Simon Peter has him on the boat. Abundant providence is flipping and flapping and flopping at his feet. And Simon Peter says – of all things, "Lord, go away from me, for I am a sinful man." Now I don't know about you, but I didn't see that one coming. Instead of a gleeful, "Goody, goody, goody," Simon Peter says, "Go away. I am unworthy."

The man or woman who say “Goody, goody, goody,” likely leave their experience unchanged. The words of Simon Peter are the response of a man who has experienced an interior change, a man who has seen the fallacy of his world crumble in the face of a new reality. We know a little something about Simon Peter, don’t we, from our other experiences of Peter in the Bible? We know him to be brash and impetuous, a bit on the arrogant side, faithful, and pretty much a control freak. All of this goes away in his encounter with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee. For Simon Peter it is not about fish, or hunger, or weary hands any more. Jesus reveals to him a new way of being that overwhelms Simon Peter like the fish swamping his boats. Simon Peter is like a marionette whose strings have been cut. He is a puddle before Jesus. But Jesus will not leave Peter in his own self-judgment. Jesus says to him those wonderful words that angels proclaim in their visitations, “Do not be afraid.” Jesus knows that Simon Peter is terrified because he has seen Jesus as the Son of God, as the Beloved. And Jesus says to the marionette, “Get up. Follow me. You will fish and transform men and women as you have been transformed. The strings that bind you are cut. Follow me.” And Simon Peter does so, along with Andrew and James and John. The boats of fish are left behind for the consumption of those who do not see what Simon Peter sees, that the source of life and love is leading them into a new way of being, still as fishers, casting their nets for God’s beloved children.

I think of this story, and I think of you and of me. I wonder about our many days when we have gotten into the boats of our daily lives, and have leaned heavily into the oars. I wonder about our steering, our instinct to find what we are looking for. I wonder about the nets full of what we think will nourish us and sustain us, and the many more empty nets that leave us disappointed and hungry. I wonder about the time or times, the moment or moments, when Jesus has climbed into our worn and weary boats and asked us to try it one more time. Put the boat there. A little deeper. I wonder, do we hear? Do we dare cast the nets?

Let me tell you a story... This is a story that I heard at clergy retreat, told by Alicia Schuster-Weltner, who heard it from Walter Bruggemann, who heard it from Will Willimon. And you are hearing it from me, so it is fourth-hand now. A true fish story... Will Willimon – a well-known preacher and Methodist bishop – tells of a visit that he had with a congregation that was just going great guns. Lots of ministries, a food pantry, a soup kitchen out of their basement, Christian ed, the whole nine yards. Everybody seems happy and filled with the spirit of love. So he visits around the church, and goes down into the basement, where the soup kitchen is located. He finds there an older man preparing the food for the homeless dinner later that day. Bishop Willimon says to him, “Isn’t this soup kitchen such a joy! What a great thing you are doing. This must be very satisfying to do.” The older man snaps back, “Nope! I hate it. These people are demanding, make a terrible mess, and stink up the whole place.” The bishop was a little taken aback. “Well,” he asked, “why are you here, doing this?” The man snapped back, “It’s where Jesus put me! Where has Jesus put you, bishop?”

Where has Jesus put you? Sit with that a minute... I suspect that Simon Peter’s response on the boat with Jesus came from the sudden awareness of where Jesus had put him, and what that would mean for him. But what about you... Where has Jesus put you? He is in the boat with you... Where are you? Jesus knows of your weary hands, your bleeding calluses, your empty nets. But what of the fish that define your lives? What of the lives that depend upon that fish? Could it be that Jesus is calling you into deeper waters, to define your life by another kind of catch, another way of being?

Where has Jesus put you?